

## Chrstitmas Time is Here by DeathByJumpingFrenchman

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**Summary:**

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For Deli on tumblr, from your Secret Santa

## Chrstitmas Time is Here

### Author's Note:

This is a bit late, but I'm still riding high from Christmas and decided to post this to wish y'all lovely people a late Merry Christmas if you celebrate it, and a happy & healthy festive late winter to those who do not.

Written for Deli in the Tumblr Secret Santa. Wishing you much peace and happiness this holiday season and into the new year.

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For as long as anyone could remember, Christmas had been celebrated among the party on the 24th in the Byers household, and for as long as anyone could remember, it never truly felt like Christmas until everyone was there, mellowed after food or as A Year Without a Santa Claus played out from the dimly glowing TV screen in front of them as they all let themselves rest, sink into the Byers' couches and into the comfort of one another. There was usually snow, and always blankets, and Dustin made hot chocolate for everyone in specialized thermoses, and Joyce had Jonathan snap pictures once they were too sleepy and too rosy to complain.

This year marked the arrival of two new members, girls at that, and with them, a strange sense of gratitude. The tradition continued on in the same way, Dustin made hot chocolate and gave Lucas extra whipped cream when he asked politely, Jonathan's camera was at the ready on the kitchen counter, they were watching bad movies from their parents' day and age, but every moment of it, every blanket and every soft look held a bit more meaning, a bit of heavy thankfulness.

The last year, absence had been prevalent. Will had been there, sandwiched between Dustin and Lucas with Mike sprawled out on the floor below them, but every so often he would trail off, or look away, or gain back a bit of hollowness everyone could swear was going away. He was haunted, and carried the burdens of what had happened mere months ago even on what he and his friends called the happiest day of the year.

There was another absence that past year too, one they all found much easier to comprehend and to deal with than Will's ailment (though they stayed close to him the whole night and always let him pick the movie). Though they had all felt varying levels of attachment to her, the four boys knew what the gaping hole beside Mike on the floor and the Eggo waffles Will had helped Joyce toast up as he thought of a comforting voice in darkness that he could not see and assurances that kept him going, meant.

This year, with the group expanding to house six instead of four, Will's laugh and El's questioning glances at whatever film Dustin was making fun of on the TV and Max, rolling her eyes around smiles at each of them meant twice as much, and had every member of the party with some filling warmth stuffed in them up to their smiles.

"I just don't get it," Dustin said, his hands flying up wildly to express his confusion, "Why would he just let an old man into his house like that?"

"Santa?" El asked, her eyes carefully trained on what was happening on the screen.

"Yeah," Dustin sniffed, "But he just looks like any other old man right now. Didn't this Ignatius kid ever learn stranger danger?" Lucas shrugged.

"Don't know man, but his parents seem pretty okay with it." He took a sip, feeding into Dustin's inane commentary. "His mom's literally feeding him."

Max let out a groan.

"Jeez guys, it doesn't matter all that much, does it? It's just a stupid Christmas movie."

There was a moment of silence. The TV continued to chatter, something about a song and believing in Santa Claus, and El continued to watch it, but Will, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin sat up straight and turned to her, their expressions stormy, or in Will's case, a smile hidden behind furrowed eyebrows and a pout.

"Do you mean to tell me," Lucas began, his eyebrows high, "That you think A Year Without a Santa Claus is stupid?" The boys crept closer, glancing at each other in affirmation as Max nodded hesitantly.

"Yeah, the concept just doesn't make sense," she said, her face twisted into a smirking battlefront.

"Well, I don't think we can let that pass," Mike said, tilting his head to match her sarcastic one.

“On three?” Will, the closest one to Max, questioned.

“One, two,” Before Dustin could get to three, the boys were leaping at a slowly backing away Max, and soon, Will was tickling her sides as the others sat back and laughed.

“Stop,” she batted at his hands, her angry scowl broken up by her raucous laughter, “ I mean it Byers,” she wheezed, squirming away, “Get off you fucker!”

El, who was disappointed at the break in the program for commercials, took notice of the spectacle around her with concern, though when she noticed it was screams of laughter and not terror, she too felt that soft emotion creeping up upon her.

“Eleven,” Max, who had become fast friends with El once they had both realized that alienating the only other girl in a group full of boys going through puberty was absolutely the stupidest thing either of them had ever done (not stupid, a voice echoed in El’s head, and she ignored it with a smile), called out to her from her compromised state. “Help me!”

So, loyal to a fault, El crept forward towards Will, who continued his assault unaware, until she was directly behind him, and, without hesitation, El reached out and began to move her fingers along his sides, something Dustin had taught her was called ‘tickling’. She was surprisingly (or unsurprisingly if you asked her ever supportive friends) very good at it.

Immediately Will reeled away from Max, his shoulders tense, and for a long moment within which no one breathed, everyone though with sinking smiles that the sudden movement might have triggered something, but before El could move away, Will was laughing harder than Max.

“Not fair,” he wheezed, “You’re supposed to be on my side, traitor!”

And that was another thing. The past year, which had felt like healing and had tasted like summer all the way through, had brought Will and El impeccably close. Joyce, who had been grieving for months, constantly leaned on Hopper for help, and, with El as his daughter, that meant that the two of them had spent increasingly long periods of time together at the Byers’ house, becoming so close that, in a sleepover their parents had only allowed because Hopper had been too tired to drive home, they had made a pact to act as siblings. With Jonathan moving to college and El still not ready to go to school with them yet, the two had decided, after one particularly

moving moment between Nancy Wheeler and Mike when she had broken an arm defending him to a group of Sophomores, that what they each needed was each other. This was not in a romantic way (they both crinkled their noses at the thought), but not in a way that close friends needed each other. El needed a brother, and Will needed a sister, and that was that. They acted like true siblings, and to anyone they met on the occasional outing, that's who they would present themselves as.

"Help Max," she said, a small smile on her face. Despite being free from her prison for more than a year, El still tended to revert back to shorter sentences when she was distracted, or in the presence of her closest friends. It made her so incredibly happy that she could just be around them, no strings attached.

Will continued to try to escape her flying hands, peels of laughter ripping from his chest, until the laughter became something darker, heavier.

El immediately noticed the signs of a coughing fit approaching and ceased her actions, waiting for it to pass. Will took a few deep breaths and looked up to all the concerned faces above him.

"Sorry," he said wincing, his voice scratchy. El dove forward to pull him into a tight hug. She still wasn't the best at vocal comfort, so she always reverted to the comforting touches she saw those around her--Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy and Steve, occasionally Hopper--give to her friends when they needed calming or comfort.

"Don't be sorry," Mike's voice cut through, hard and inarguable. Will said 'sorry' too much, they all knew it, and they all took part in making sure he never felt like anything that had happened to him or to anyone involved, was his fault. Mike, who tried and still failed to not remember his best friend tied to a chair, rope biting into his wrists, trapped in his own body, was especially protective in this way, and angry at any negative force that dared break its way into Will's, or any of their, lives.

They all huddled together then, brought close by the reminder that the heaviness around them was not made up, did not originate in their minds, but was the deeply rooted consequence of the hell they, Will most of all, had been put through.

They stayed that way, watching the movie, laughter forgotten but slowly coming back, until Dustin got up to dance to Snow Miser and Heat Miser, singing both parts, and pulling Lucas up to dance with him.

“Stop it you goof,” Lucas laughed, struggling lightly, but allowing himself to be swung into a silly jig. The rest of the four laid their heads against each other’s chests and shoulders and arms and watched with brightness illuminating their features.

“Boys!” Joyce reached the entryway to the living room, her face tired but happy, “And girls,” she said, nodding at El and Max, who had both become just as much of permanent fixtures in her household as the other boys. The visits from the entire party had become increasingly longer and more frequent, that heaviness giving way to light whenever they all saw each other, safe, themselves, and at Will’s house, and Joyce had become gratefully accustomed to the company for her son. “The pizzas are done.”

None of the boys, who had been doing this same thing for years, could think of anything that screamed ‘Christmas Eve’ more than pizza. El had never even heard of the holiday until months ago. And Max, well, she was just happy to be around people who cared about her enough to do the get together. It was safe to say none of them had a problem with this choice in food.

They all crowded around the kitchen table, slices of specialized pizza they’d made themselves an hour before drooping in their hands and glasses of mock-champagne that was really just fizzy apple juice that Lucas had mowed his neighbors’ lawns for weeks to be able to afford gripped in their hands. There wasn’t much room at the table, but no one minded the closeness.

They traded stories over their food, made up ones and ones they’d heard in movies or interactions with bullies that had been fictionalized so as to result in a win for a member of the party, and shared laughter and tender smiles as they shared food. The heaviness in each of their chests was not unpleasant. In fact, it was grounding.

“I make him fall,” El was beaming from ear to ear as she talked in sentences that were sometimes half-bitten, and sometimes reflected an improved vocabulary that had become her dialect.

“Why we only hearing about this now?” Will laughed, his eyes alight and sparkling, and though the subject matter should have made him uncomfortable, all he could feel was pride in his sister (and a bit in himself, though that was a story for another time).

“I forgot about it,” her cheeks flushed, but she was still smiling, recounting the mailman she had seen when she had snuck into the outskirts of town to walk over to Mike’s house where a campaign had been taking place, and how she had tripped him when he muttered

some slur or another towards two boys holding hands on a park bench.

“Serves him right,” Dustin muttered darkly as Lucas reached over his head to high five El and Mike gave her a one armed hug. Max, still a bit unsure about giving signs of affection, gave El a small smile that seemed to say more than it meant to, her eyes soft, and her hand coming to rest on El’s.

The party finished dinner, their smiles never leaving their faces. They had, for the first time, all convinced their parents to let them spend the night, though it had taken weeks for some to do so, and so there was no rush to exchange gifts as there usually was, only soft, sweet mellowness.

Eventually, Joyce brought out cookies, each one with special designs that Will had spent two hours icing (though he would never admit it), and they all migrated back to the couch. This time, they all squeezed onto it, limb to limb, and allowed for themselves to just be.

Will glanced around at the cookies on the coffee table and the television blaring out green and red, and at his friends and his family (though to him, there really wasn't much of a difference between the two). He saw all of this, let it settle into him, warm and smiling, and knew that the heaviness around him was not sorrow and worry, but thankfulness and compassion and love, the tugging in all of their chests were just all the things even the demons from an alternate dimension could not take away

### **Author's Note:**

Thanks for reading! You can find me on tumblr at [should-I-gay-or-should-I-go](#)